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THE MESSAGE OF THE STARS
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Psalm 19:1–6
Genesis 1:1–5, 24–25
John 1:1–4, 14

"The heavens are telling the glory of God."
Psalm 19:1 (NRSV)

Distinguished American author Julian Barnes begins his widely acclaimed book, *Nothing to Be Afraid Of* with the powerful and poignant line: "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." Barnes is not at all hostile toward religion; he simply does not have any, but he's nostalgic about it, almost wistful. "I don't believe in God, but I miss him," he says (*New York Times Book Review*, 5 October 2008).

His book is one of a series of best sellers, expressions of what is being called the "neo-Atheism" arguing that there is no God; that atheism is the rational, scientific, realistic position; and that religion, based on belief in the existence of God, is a delusion. Atheism is not new. In fact, atheism has been around for a long time. In American folklore the village atheist was the odd chap out on the fringe of the community announcing that there is no God, with nobody much paying attention. What's new is that in our time, these past few years, atheists have come out to make their case publically, are selling a lot of books which people are reading, and have become confrontational, evangelical even. The story is going around about the two urban missionaries, dressed like Mormons, in dark suits, white shirts, and ties, who knock on the front door. When a man comes to the door, they hand him a pamphlet. "Why, this pamphlet is blank," he says. "Yes, we know. We're sorry: we're atheists."

And atheists are organizing and acting a lot like a religious denomination. There was a gathering a while ago, the Atheist International Alliance Convention, which I'll bet felt like and acted a lot like the Presbyterian General Assembly or a Methodist Annual Conference. You may have read in the newspaper that in London a Christian evangelical group rented space on the sides of buses and placed an ad that included a verse of scripture and the address of a Christian website. Adriane Sherim was curious, went to the website, and was "startled to learn that she and her nonbelieving friends were headed straight to hell to spend all eternity in torment. 'That's a bit extreme,' she thought, as well as hard to prove." After all, Great Britain does have proof in advertising standards.

So how about a corrective? Adraine, an entrepreneur, started the Atheist Bus Campaign and set out to raise $8,000. Some prominent nonbelievers caught wind of the campaign, and in a few days she had raised $200,000. And so 800 British buses carried large ads for awhile which announced “There’s Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life.” The American Humanist Association loved the idea and started its own bus campaign in Washington, D.C., around Christmas with ads that read a little more gently, “Why Believe in a God?” over a picture of Santa Claus. “Just Be Good for Goodness’ Sake.” And just last month, not to be outdone by London and Washington, Chicago — as if we don’t have enough to deal with, with our ex-governor’s bad haircut and agonizingly mediocre baseball — Chicago buses bore an ad saying, “In the Beginning Man Created God.”

More seriously, over the past few years is the series of best sellers advocating atheism and condemning religion as an utterly negative social force. Christopher Hitchens, author of *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, calls religion “violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children” (quoted in *Image: A Journal of Art, Faith, and Mystery*, Fall 2007, p. 63). Talk-show host Bill Maher echoes that critique regularly and recently produced a motion picture, *Religulous*, which pokes fun and mocks all religions. Our reviewer at *The Christian Century* called it a “mockumentary” and found it amusing but ultimately silly. Maher finds the most extreme, curious, bizarre expressions of religion, sets them up, attacks, tears them down. It is so easy to do: interviewing the man who plays Jesus in the Holy Land Experience in Orlando and members of a truckers’ prayer group. “Christians come off as buffoons, Muslims as ticking time bombs” (*Christian Century*, 18 November 2008). Maher, the *Century* review said, simply can’t imagine that there are believers who think.

There is some truth to all of it, painful truth. Religion is violent sometimes, intolerant often. Religion has been used to justify slavery and the oppression of women and children. Religion has opposed free scientific inquiry and academic freedom and is used today to oppose women’s reproductive health and family planning and to deny basic human rights on the basis of gender orientation and expression and, in the church, to deny the opportunity for full participation to people who are gay and lesbian. People who believe in God and love God and love their neighbors and love the church know better than anyone the limits and failures and sins of religion and religious institutions. Robert Frost said he had a “lover’s quarrel with the world” and so faithful believers have a lover’s quarrel with religion and with the church.

Bill Maher and the other critics have trouble conceding that there are believers who can think and do think, long and hard, about profound questions, like the very existence of God.

One of them, one of our best, distinguished Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson was asked recently about the new atheism. She responded, “Atheists are rejecting the old images of God that don’t really work that well even for Christians anymore. Just who is the God in whom Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, doesn’t believe?” “Dawkins,” Johnson says, “envisions God if not exactly with a white beard, then at least as some kind chap, however supersized. This is not the Christian God.” Johnson said she has migrated away from the patriarchal notion of God represented in her patriarchal church. “The notion of God as one who embraces us, in whom we live and move and have our being, is so much more my sense of God than the grand old man in the sky” (quoted in *Context* August 2008).

> In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

That is how the Bible begins. Not with a philosophic argument for the existence of God—there is none of that in the Bible—but with a statement of faith. It is not science. It is not history. Literalists, fundamentalists who try to force it to be history, geology, biology, get it wrong, I believe. To regard the text as literal, historic, documentable, provable fact is to misunderstand and misuse it. Worst of all, it is to set up a false conflict between reason and religion—the conflict the new atheists exploit—and ultimately an unfortunate conflict between religion and science. There is no conflict between religion and science in this text.

Can you prove that God exists, that there is an ultimate truth? Of course not. Can you disprove it? No. Hans Küng, one of our greatest thinkers, in a new book, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion*, observes that if you can’t prove the existence of God, neither can you prove the nonexistence. “Atheism too,” he observes, “lives by undemonstrated faith.”

At its best, religion welcomes science as a partner in the search for truth. Copernicus, the Polish astronomer who first proposed that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the solar system, delayed the publication of his findings until after his death because he knew they would get him in trouble with Rome, and Galileo, who refined the ideas after observing the movement of the planets, was forced to recant by the Inquisition and spent

the last years of his life under house arrest in Florence. But both Copernicus and Galileo were men of faith and believed that what they were doing in their scientific research was deepening human knowledge of God. Both believed that the more we know about the world and how things work, the more we know about the creator.

"The heavens are telling the glory of God," the psalmist wrote. Or, as the author translated that idea in Psalm 19, "How marvelous God's greatness, how glorious God's might. To this the world bears witness in wonders day and night . . . the starry hosts are singing through all the light strewn sky of God's majestic temple and palace courts on high." You can see and know something of the nature and character of the creator by looking at the creation. Sitting around their fires and looking up in wonder millennia ago, or peering through the Hubble telescope deep into the blackness of space in 2009, or lying on your back at the beach watching for meteors, as I plan to do before summer is over — human beings have forever been drawn out of themselves and into the realm of mystery and the unknown in the simple act of looking at the world, the creation.

Cosmic accident or the will and intent of a creator? Atheism believes the former; faith, the latter.

At the center of the conflict between science and religion (and by now I hope I am persuading you that there is no conflict) is the fascinating figure of Charles Darwin. Based on his observations made during the five-year exploratory voyage of the *HMS Beagle,* Darwin proposed that life has evolved from simple to complex forms over a very long time. He knew how unsettling his ideas would be, and he anticipated and responded to religious objections. Scholars disagree about whether or not Darwin believed in God. He did attend his parish church, but some say it was for appearances' sake and to mollify his wife who insisted he go to church with her . . . we all can understand that, how nothing trumps domestic tranquility, not even theological integrity. But — he is buried in Westminster Abbey. And what he saw and analyzed scientifically made him more, not less, reverent. Biblical literalists — fundamentalists— attack Darwin and evolution as contrary to the Bible. But is the notion of evolution, a process over millions of years, any less amazing and magnificent and beautiful than the idea of creation in six days a few thousand years ago? Not for me. "Subtle is the Lord" Einstein said once.

Darwin kept a daily journal and one day in 1832 he wrote about the view from a peak, "When we reached the crest and looked backward: a glorious view, the atmosphere so resplendently clear, the sky an intense blue, the profound valleys, the quiet mountain of snow. . . . It was like hearing in full orchestra a chorus of the Messiah" (Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith*, pp. 77, 78).

Krista Tippett, creator and host of the popular NPR program *Speaking of Faith,* says that there are two ways of knowing and they are represented by science and religion. They are not opposed. They are complementary. Neither is adequate without the other. Albert Einstein said that decades ago: “Religion without science is blind; science without religion is lame.”

Tippett learned that when she interviewed John Polkinghorne, distinguished mathematical physicist and an Anglican priest, author of many scholarly articles and books on science and religion and one of the leading participants in the new dialogue between religion and science. Polkinghorne is too sophisticated a scientist for the scientists to ignore or dismiss him, and he says simply (or not so simply, actually), “Standard physical causation cannot adequately describe the manifold ways in which things and people interact.” I think that means that there is more to reality than you can get into a test tube or describe in a formula.

Polkinghorne does not propose that God can be proved, but he does argue that belief in God makes more sense of the world and of human experience than does atheism.

Among his reasons for believing in God:

- The intelligibility of the universe

- The anthropic fine tuning of the universe, which he illustrates by quoting Freeman Dyson: “The more I examine the universe and its architecture the more evidence I find that the universe, in some sense, must have known we were coming.”

- There are two ways of knowing, Professor Polkinghorne asserts: “A scientist could take a beautiful painting, could analyze every scrap of paint on the canvas, tell you what its chemical composition was, would incidentally destroy the painting, but would have missed the point. The chemical composition of the paint is an accurate piece of information, but it is not alone adequate. In fact it quite misses the essence of the painting, the beauty and truth of it.” (Interview with Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith*, American Public Media, 29 May 2008)

Albert Einstein, a lover of great music, was asked if he believed that there was a scientific explanation for everything. “Yes” Einstein replied, “it would be possible, but it wouldn’t mean anything. It would be description without meaning — as if you described a Beethoven symphony as a variation of wave pressure” (*CONTEXT*, June 2009, Martin E. Marty, ed.).

So with creation: science knows truth, but it's only part of the reality, the truth. Equally relevant is "The heavens are telling the glory of God."

"In the beginning when God created the earth, the earth was without form and void. . . . And God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light."

In the fullness of time, we Christians believe, that original word—that primal, creative, and creating word "Let there be light"—was spoken again by God in ways that words and ideas, creeds and textbooks and sermons—surely sermons—only partially describe. What makes us Christians is the faith that:

> in the beginning was the Word,
> in him all things came into being,
> in him was life, and
> the light shines in darkness and is never, ever overcome

Those are faith words, deeply Christian words, words with power in them to overcome every darkness, even death, and they are the same words with which the Bible begins, and the most profound and beautifully Christian of them all are these:

> The Word—that primal, creating word—became flesh and dwelt among us.
> Jesus, Jesus the Christ, is his name.

Poetry, art, music say for us what we cannot find words big enough to say. Did you notice how often music comes up?

Charles Darwin, 177 years ago, looking out from a mountain peak and thinking about the Hallelujah Chorus.

Julian Barnes, in his sad atheism confessing "I miss God," says he misses the purpose behind Mozart's *Requiem,* misses the God that inspired Italian painting, French stained glass, and German music.

Hans Küng, the great theologian, in his very rigorous, dense book about religion and science says that if you want to understand the biblical phrase "Let there be light," don't turn to physics or philosophy but to Franz Joseph Haydn's *Creation*, "with the surprising fortissimo change in the whole orchestra from dark E minor into radiant, triumphant C Major."

And so it is that sometimes, looking in wonder at the stars or singing a great hymn or hearing magnificent music, I think we most know God and experience God and believe in God.

Johann Sebastian Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* is one of the most glorious pieces of music ever written, a miracle. Someone told me once that when Bach wrote the striking, unforgettable opening notes of the Toccata he was thinking about the striking opening words of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word."

The Word that created
The Word that was God
The Word that became flesh

Unable to bring this to a satisfactory conclusion, I asked Jared Jacobsen for help. So now our most Christian faith, our most profound confession, our deepest prayer:

"In the beginning was the Word."

(*J. S. Bach's Toccata from the* Toccata and Fugue in D Minor)